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HIGH-LEVEL ROUNDTABLE

**The implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,
the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General
Assembly and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective towards
the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals**

Written Statement *

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

I have the responsibility to respond on behalf of the UN system. It is both an honor and a tremendous challenge. A challenge because the statements from Member States were so rich and thought-provoking that it is difficult to do justice to all in the short time that I have.

During the 54th session of the Commission of the Status of Women, we are celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which resulted from it. The great hope for a world without inequalities, shared by the thousands of participants at Beijing, was captured in this powerful “agenda for women’s empowerment”.

As the representative of Brazil noted, Beijing not only underlined 12 critical areas of concern to women’s lives, but it also succeeded in building a consensus among the thousands of participants (50,000 by one account), including delegates from 189 governments. Not to mention the representatives of NGOs and journalists, who to some extent provided a voice for the many others who were unable to attend. The truly international nature of the event is an achievement in itself; and evidence that the call for an end to discrimination against women resonates in the four corners of the globe.

The **Beijing** Conference signaled a new ear in the way gender equality issues were treated in the international agenda. It not only shed a brighter spotlight on fundamental issues which are central to women’s lives, but it also changed the lens through which we view and perceive these issues.

Beijing announced a new approach to gender equality – starting with the introduction of the term gender equality itself. In 1981, the CEDAW had created the international legal architecture to legitimize women’s rights and dismantle discrimination. In Beijing, horizons were broadened. For the first time, there was a focus on empowering women, as opposed to “merely” eliminating discrimination. “Gender mainstreaming” was introduced and embraced as a key strategy to tackle gender inequalities in a comprehensive way.

Perhaps one of the most significant shifts in paradigm was the confirmation of the view, “that human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights,”

International work towards gender equality did not, of course, stop at Beijing in 1995. In the United Nations Millennium Declaration adopted by the General Assembly at the Millennium Summit in 2000, Member States confirmed their renewed commitment to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate sustainable development and peace. They also resolved to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement CEDAW.

Our task during the next few days is to reflect on the situation to assess where we are on the road to women’s empowerment and gender equality. We already heard from some of those who took the floor this afternoon that the road ahead sadly remains long 15 years after Beijing and 10 years after the Millennium Summit landmark discussions.

We also heard several encouraging stories from around the globe – some inspiring achievements, especially in the area of legislative frameworks - such as Canada, Norway, Philippines, Qatar, Colombia, Brazil, but the representatives of MS were also very frank about the gaps and remaining challenges. Speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China this morning, HE Ambassador Abdullah M. Alsaidi, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Yemen to the UN and Chairman of the Group of 77 informed us that [and I quote] “poverty still constitutes a major challenge for women especially in developing countries. Girls continue to account for the majority of children out of school and women remain a majority of those who are classified as illiterate.” He went on to say that problems remain in other critical areas including violence against women, access to labor markets, women’s representation in political and other decision-making for a at high levels, restrictions on women’s human rights, etc.

We heard that the Member States took note of the Beijing Platform for Action while discussing and drafting the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, and reached an understanding that gender equality is both a goal in itself as well as a means towards the achievement of all of the Goals. It was also noted that although the linkages between the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the achievement of the MDGs are increasingly recognized at the policy-making level, more efforts are needed to translate this awareness into concrete action. Several Member States were concerned that we would not be able to achieve the targets set by the MDGs and they noted that there are no magic bullets to change things around.

Excellencies,

The 15th anniversary of the Beijing Platform could not come at a more critical time. The world is struggling with crises of unprecedented gravity. The financial crisis, environmental and humanitarian crises (such as the tragic earthquake in Haiti and more recently in Chile), climate change and conflicts have exacerbated poverty levels, deepened inequalities, and heightened our awareness of the fragility of peace and stability.

Research shows us that women and girls suffer the brunt of crises. To give an example from the field of education, the advances made in improving girls’ and women’s access to education and training over the past decade risk being undermined by reductions in international aid and national investments caused by the interlocking financial, environmental and humanitarian crises. Yet, we all know that compromising the education of girls and women compromises the social protection that education provides them, their families and their communities; compromises their human rights and compromises their ability to overcome and survive these crises

In this context of crises, it would be easy for women’s rights and gender equality to be eclipsed and deprioritized. Yet one clear message from today’s discussion is that gender equality is fundamental for achieving the goals of development and peace – **it should thus be incorporated as part of the answer and response to crises**, rather than relegated to a “wish list” for more prosperous and propitious times. Crises should be

seen as a time for *new* rather than lost opportunities; a time when gender equality can take on a central role in overcoming crises and establishing a new, more equal status quo. The question we should be asking as practitioners and policymakers is not how crises will have a negative impact on gender budgets and programming but rather how can we build a future where women can enjoy equal opportunities and rights as men in all spheres of life. We should explore deeper the causes of the crises some of which may have to do with the fact that half of the world's population is still largely left out of the decision and policy making processes and that gender equality issues are still discussed as special interest issues largely by women and among women.

This year's anniversary is in fact a useful reminder for the international community to the ongoing relevance of the Beijing Platform, which for the past 15 years continues to provide us with a practical roadmap to resist these crises and challenges to women's rights. The 12 strategic objectives list concrete actions and measures to promoting gender equality in all spheres of life. 15 years later, these still read as ambitious, visionary and relevant as they did in 1995.

This is a reflection of the progressive nature of the Beijing Platform. On the occasion of its 15th anniversary and in this period of crises, it is necessary to recapture both this progressive spirit and the momentum of 1995 to push forward with the realization of the 12 strategic Objectives, which are so critical for achieving gender equality.

The messages emanating from this discussion for governments and decision makers are clear. **Keep the promises made in Beijing to the world's women 15 years ago.** Improve the partnerships and collaborations between international, national, regional and local organizations. Increase opportunities for exchange and consultation with women on policy issues related to education and other critical areas. Engage with women's organizations and associations, ensure accountability and perhaps most important of all, ensure continued and stable funding.

So as we celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, let us take this opportunity to revive those commitments and redouble our efforts not in spite of but rather, *especially* because of the crises we are currently traversing. The institutional mechanisms such as the Beijing Platform and the Millennium Development Goals are in place, and it is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders - from the international arena to local communities - to ensure that they are implemented.

I beg your indulgence for 2 minutes to talk about my own organization, UNESCO, and its commitments. At UNESCO, we have designated gender equality one of two global priorities (along with Africa) for the period until 2013. Our newly elected Director-General, Ms. Irina Bokova, has made it clear that during her mandate, she is committed to furthering this global priority through substantive and concrete action all five programming areas of the Organization (education, the sciences, culture, communication and information)

As the first step towards this goal, she has made education the center of her efforts as she believes that Education is the key to the achievement of gender equality, women's empowerment and all of the other Millennium Development Goals.

UNESCO's most recent global monitoring report found that gender parity in education is improving:

Between the periods of 1985-1994 and that of 2000 – 2007, the number of adult female literates increased by 14%, compared with 7% for men. This seems to be –and *is* of course – a good thing.

However, if women seem to be catching up, we must remember that they started from much further behind. So much so that in some contexts and at the current rate, it was predicated in our Global Monitoring Report that it would take women in South and West Asia about 56 years to catch up.¹ Indeed, astonishingly 774 million adults lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Sixty-seven percent - two thirds - of these are women. This cannot be good enough.

Education for All will remain elusive unless we can overcome the factors, which exclude certain children from education. Among these, gender is key, especially when combined with other factors of exclusion such as poverty, ethnicity, location, disability and race. In short, girls often find themselves disadvantaged. In total, 71 million children are currently denied this fundamental right to education; adolescent girls are more likely to be out of school than boys.²

In the current times of crises, poverty-stricken households are forced to make hard choices. They may no longer be able to afford to send children to school. The need for food outweighs the need for schoolbooks. The need for the extra wages a child can earn outweighs the need for education. How do families make the difficult choice of which children to offer the 'privilege' of education? How do parents choose between their children? Sadly, when households are faced with such choices, deeply entrenched gender norms often mean that girls are taken out of school before boys. Once again those most vulnerable become more vulnerable still.

The importance of education was stressed once again when female access to primary and secondary education was made the third Millennium Development Goal. The benefits of educating women are manifold. Access to education is in itself a universal human right and a vital means of empowering women. We know that in addition, by educating a woman we educate a family. These benefits – improved education of children, lower fertility rates, improved maternal and infant health to name just a few – are reinforced, when women have access to secondary education. Recalling the 12 critical areas of concern listed in the Beijing platform for action – from sharing power and decision-making to protecting women from violence – it is hard to imagine any which would not improve thanks to girls' and women's education and training.

¹ GMR: 99

² 54% of out of school adolescents were girls in 2007. GMR, UNESCO: 88

The same is true of the relationship between women and **climate change**. As we watch our fragile Earth faltering, and women are often disproportionately affected by climate change, women are disproportionately represented among decision-makers and experts.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging the real progress that has been made by a united effort of the international community in advancing towards gender equality. However, we must be mindful that gender equality has yet to be achieved which implies that there is always the risk: the risk of taking one step back. The road traveled is not a one-way street. This could not be clearer as we meet in the shadow of the worst global economic crisis since 1929.

As the representative from Morocco noted, this is our wake-up call. Now more than ever the efforts need to be maintained.

What was special about the Beijing Conference and its Platform for Action was both the progressive and comprehensive vision and the international consensus on which it was based. Both of these ingredients remain more pertinent than ever, if we are to ensure that we remain two steps forward and do not take a single step back.

As a young girl wrote many years ago: *“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world”*.

Thank you.